

# Vasilisa the Brave

## Russia

MANY YEARS AGO, there lived a girl named Vasilisa. Some say she was the most beautiful girl in her village, and very smart too.

When she was young, her mother died, leaving her a small wooden doll as a token of remembrance. "Keep it close," her mother said. "As long as you feed it every day, it will help you in times of need."

Vasilisa grew up, and fed the doll every day. Her father remarried, but Vasilisa's stepmother and stepsisters did not like her. They were very mean to her. The stepmother made her work very hard, but with the help of the doll, Vasilisa was able to complete every task her stepmother gave her. Friends would often come by to visit Vasilisa, and as she grew older, suitors came to the house to ask for her hand in marriage. Her stepmother ordered them all to leave, as she wanted Vasilisa to work for her instead of start a life of her own.

One day, her father had to leave on a business trip. While he was away, his wife sold the house and moved Vasilisa and her stepsisters to a small hut in a dark forest. In this forest lived a witch named Baba Yaga, whom all the villagers feared.

One evening, the stepmother decided to play a trick on Vasilisa. While she was working, she blew out all the candles except for one. "You can't work in darkness!" she said, "Go to Baba Yaga and ask to borrow a light."

Vasilisa went out into the forest. She was afraid, so she fed her doll and asked it for advice. "What should I do? All the townsfolk say Baba Yaga is old and mean. Some even say she possesses strange and evil powers."

"Do not be afraid," her doll said. "I can keep you safe."

She walked all day until at last she came to Baba Yaga's hut. It was hard to miss – it stood on two chicken legs, and the fence was made of bones, with lamps made of skulls along the top. The gate was made of long, fearsome teeth that locked together. She was very afraid, but she knew her doll would keep her safe. She took a deep breath and walked inside.

She entered to find Baba Yaga sitting at her table. "Who is there?" the witch said, turning around.

Vasilisa gulped. "It is I, Vasilisa. My stepmother has

sent me to ask you for a light."

"Ah, yes. I have heard of her. I will give you a light, but you must work for it. Stay here the night and help me do some chores. If you are good, I will send you home with the light you need." Behind Vasilisa, the gates closed their teeth, shutting her in.

First, Baba Yaga asked Vasilisa to bring her dinner. When she got to the stove, there was enough food to feed the whole town! Baba Yaga ate it all, leaving Vasilisa only scraps.

"I am finished, and am going to bed," said Baba Yaga as she finished her meal. "In the barn, there is a barrel of corn. In the morning, you shall pick out all the rotten kernels. After that, you must clean the house, cook my meals, and wash the linens and clothing. If you do not complete these tasks, right down to every rotten kernel, I will keep you here forever."

When she heard Baba Yaga sleeping, she pulled her doll out of her pocket. "How can I possibly finish all those chores? Oh, I will never get out of here! I'll never see my father again!"

"Don't worry," assured the doll. "I'll help you. Get some rest, and we'll start our work in the morning."

When she awoke the next day, Baba Yaga was already awake and gone. Vasilisa trod out to the barn to start her work. To her surprise, she found the corn already sorted – the doll had done it! "All you need to do is prepare supper. I will help with the rest," whispered the doll. All day, Vasilisa and the doll worked side by side. When Baba Yaga returned, she was shocked to find a spotless house, with a hot meal waiting on the table!

"Very well," she said, though she was suspicious. "Tomorrow, you must do the same, and also separate the poppy seeds from the dirt."

"No problem," said Vasilisa.

The next morning, Baba Yaga once again rode off, and when she returned, Vasilisa had once again exceeded her expectations. "Come, sit with me," she said as she ate the meal Vasilisa had prepared. She was beginning to see that Vasilisa was not only beautiful, but had courage and confidence. Everyone else in the village was afraid of her, but Vasilisa was not.

They sat in silence and ate their food. Though Baba Yaga had turned out to be much nicer than she had been made out to be, Vasilisa was still nervous around her.

Then, Baba Yaga said, "Let me ask you a question. How have you been able to finish the tremendous

amount of work I have given you?"

Shyly, Vasilisa responded: "Before she died, my mother gave me a charm. The magic of this charm helps me accomplish the impossible."

"I knew it!" cried Baba Yaga, jumping out of her chair in anger. "You had help. I won't have any charms or sorcery in this house. Leave at once," she said, pointing toward the gate, its twisted grin holding back the night.

"Here," she said, handing Vasilisa a skull from the fence. "A light to guide you home. All you needed was a light, correct?"

All night and day she walked, and by the next evening, she had reached her home again. She was just about to throw out the skull when she heard it speak: "Better keep me, dear. Your stepmother still needs light."

Vasilisa went bounding up the steps to her house, sure her stepmother was livid. "I am home!" she cried as she flew in the door. "You will not believe what I –"

She stopped short and gasped. As soon as she entered, the skull fixed its gaze on her stepmother and stepsisters. All night, it held them in its grasp – try as they might, they could not leave its sight. When Vasilisa awoke in the morning, she could not find her stepmother and stepsisters at all – just piles of dust where they had been the night before.



*How is Baba Yaga different from other witches you have read about?*

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*What makes this story scary?*

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*What makes it a fairy tale?*

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*Put these events in the order that they happened.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ Baba Yaga tells Vasilisa to sort the poppy seeds.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vasilisa's father remarries.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vasilisa's stepmother moves the family into the woods.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Baba Yaga gets angry and sends Vasilisa back home.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vasilisa's father leaves on a business trip.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vasilisa's stepmother tells her to get a light from Baba Yaga.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Baba Yaga tells Vasilisa to sort the corn.

